

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Response to Col. Kevin McAninch's "How the Army's Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback Program Could Become a Catalyst for Leader Development"

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Dr. Jon Fallesen

In the September-October 2016 issue of *Military Review*, Col. Kevin McAninch's article on multi-source assessment and feedback (MSAF) claimed that the Army is not getting as much value from the MSAF program as it could if the program were implemented differently.¹ While I agree that MSAF can realize greater value, there are several aspects of the program that should be clarified.

The program grew into a requirement from the idea of providing Army leaders with development that was uniquely individualized. MSAF was implemented through the initiative process of the Army Leader Development Program from recommendations in the Army Training and Leader Development Panel study.²

After successful pilots with fourteen units ranging from battalion to corps, the program was directed by the Army and codified in regulations.³ The 2014 National Defense Authorization Act directed that the secretary of defense use MSAF as the exemplar 360 program and assess expanded implementation across the services.⁴ The report stemming from the task was prepared by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and advised all services to use 360-degree assessments for development purposes.⁵

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley comments, "The Commander 360 program ensures leaders receive honest and candid feedback on their performance and leadership effectiveness. Armed with this critical

How the Army's Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback Program Could Become a Catalyst for Leader Development

Col. Kevin McAninch, U.S. Army

The U.S. Army considers it important to develop leaders who can operate in the dynamic, strategic environment of the twenty-first century. A component of the Army's training and leader development, and a tool in the self-development domain, is the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) program. The MSAF is a 360-degree leader development tool. It provides feedback to leaders where they can use it to inform and focus their self-development.

Implemented in 2010, the MSAF initially addressed "to improve complex leadership challenges, to enhance leader adaptability and self-awareness, and to identify Army leaders' strengths and weaknesses." It is a tool for their preparation for future leader responsibilities.⁶ Many civilian organizations use 360-degree feedback for employee development.⁷ In the Army, officers are required to initiate assessments, provide assessments of others, and receive the data of their MSAF from their officers' evaluation report (OER).⁸

Knowing, requiring participation does not equate to developmental effectiveness. Civilian studies on post-assessment feedback from 360-degree programs indicate

widespread employee performance improvement is unlikely.⁹ Additionally, when the feedback is only in the hands of the individual, accountability in interpreting it is lacking, and an inability to implement behavior changes is likely.¹⁰ Development fails to occur when rated officers are uncomfortable, when they see the feedback as supplemental information, or when they view the assessment as an administrative event instead of part of their development process.¹¹ In other words, the tool can become just a bureaucratic hurdle to jump through.

In their groundbreaking work *Longevity: Character, Deliberate Practice, and the Army's Future*, Leonard Pittet and Steven J. Gartner discuss the Army's MSAF.

Recognizing all efforts to create an officer's OER that they have initiated a multi-source assessment and feedback (MSAF) in the last three years probably has the well-intended purpose of excelling the force to 360-degree feedback. But, the unintended outcome has been the diminution of the *grit* of an officer's signature as critical officers, rates, and senior ratings diminish the requirement as an administrative nuisance rather than an ethical choice.¹²

The Army is failing to make effective use of the MSAF. This failure is not because 360-degree assessments are inherently flawed. Instead, it is because the Army's implementation is flawed. With certain changes, the MSAF could be a powerful means for building the



Major Christopher Pitt is the Executive Director of the National Army Medical Center. Gen. Steven Gartner presents 21 May 2014. MSAF is a 360-degree leader development tool. It provides feedback to leaders where they can use it to inform and focus their self-development. (Photos by Sgt. Ryan Nease, U.S. Army)

kind of relationships that would enhance leader development. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to influence the Army to improve how it uses the program.

The decision first shows how and why the MSAF is failing to meet its goals. Then it describes a critical weakness in Army leader development efforts that a 360-degree assessment tool could address, if implemented effectively. Next, it explores ways the Army could respond to the evidence that Army leaders are scarcely benefiting from the MSAF. Finally, it recommends the Army adopt four initiatives that could make the MSAF an effective catalyst for leader development.

How the Army's Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback Program Measures Up

Each year, the Center for Army Leadership conducts surveys to assess leadership in the Army. It produces annual reports known as the Center for Army

Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL).¹³ The reports cover a wide range of topics and capture "assessments from the field about leadership and leader development."¹⁴ The center has been assessing the MSAF since 2010. The 2014 report, published June 2015, describes the goal for the MSAF program: "The optimal impact of the process is a, improving leadership capabilities; b, reduced turnover; c, the assessed leader's actions that follow feedback receipt, such as requesting additional feedback from others, interacting with a coach, developing an individual leader development plan (ILDP), and self-initiated learning."¹⁵

These program goals. The 2014 CASAL highlights the disappointing state of the MSAF program. The report shows that most officers using MSAF do not value the program, do not devote effort to self-development and improvement, and do not internalize their feedback. The goals of the MSAF program are not being achieved. Indicators also suggest "a culture of resistance" from

information, they can continue to grow and develop as an Army leader.⁶ He sees that improving readiness depends on improving leadership.

The Center for Army Leadership (CAL) agrees with McAninch that the MSAF program is worth investing the effort to increase its impact. The CAL Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) studies show that a majority of officers rate MSAF effective for making them more aware of their strengths and developmental needs.⁷ An even higher percentage of junior and senior NCOs and Army civilian leaders rate it effective.⁸ While ratings of value are mostly favorable, attitudes on some criteria are declining or are level, especially among officers who are required to record compliance on their officer evaluation report (OER).

One reason for the ratings trends is that many officers are not using the program as designed:

- Army leaders are required to complete an assessment on themselves and to contribute to the assessments of other leaders. Many leaders are not getting other leaders to participate in their assessments.⁹ Without 360-degree feedback from multiple personnel, no 360-degree program will have a strong impact.
- Many leaders are not viewing their feedback report, so they are not receiving any value from their assessment other than the possible intrinsic value of reflecting on their leadership while they complete the self-assessment.¹⁰
- Many leaders are not discussing their feedback with anyone.¹¹ They are not making use of MSAF coaches, not seeking coaching from professional military education faculty, and not discussing it with their superior, mentors, or peers. Without coaching, they are not being challenged to treat the feedback as a real indication of their ability nor how to learn to use their strengths to improve themselves.

Implementation cannot be entirely faulted if the program is not used as intended.

McAninch omitted a comparison of MSAF to other Army leader development practices, which would shed additional light on its value. The impact of MSAF on leader development is similar to the impact of other programs like Army-provided distance learning, formal leader development programs within units, and performance counseling.¹² MSAF requires a small amount of time and a fraction of investment compared to these other practices. For every two Army leaders, only one

completed an assessment on another leader in the last year, and on average each assessment took twenty minutes or less to complete.¹³ Costs are low, and many leaders assessed by MSAF rate it favorably for improving their leadership capabilities and improving their unit or organization. Education, seminars, performance counseling, and assessments and feedback are all desired practices for developing leaders in any organization.

Low to moderate impact ratings of leader development practices may be symptoms of a culture that is not fully vested in improving leadership. A defining aspect of a skill is that it can be improved through development or practice. The Army's 2009 CASAL results revealed that one-fifth of Army leaders believed that leadership ability is what a person is born with and training would not change it, although a considerable majority did believe that leadership is a skill and can be improved.¹⁴ Multiple studies demonstrate that leadership can be treated as a skill and that its development can result in improved leadership performance.¹⁵ For any Army leader development to work, Army leaders must believe it is important and possible to improve.

McAninch recommended four ways to improve the MSAF program. Two of the ways involved compulsory actions, which are contradictory to his point about changing the program to be purely voluntary. A successful 360-degree program requires doing it, understanding the feedback, and taking action on the feedback. Forcing someone to self-develop is not a certain path to improvement. If tracking mandatory compliance through the OER had a negative impact on the perceived value of the program, forcing follow-up would have a similar negative impact.

Another recommendation by McAninch actually has been an original and enduring aspect of the MSAF program. Training coaches, especially faculty as coaches, has always been a part of the MSAF program. The original directive required professional military education faculty, cadre, and staff to provide coaching to assist students in interpreting 360-degree results and planning development action plans for improvement.¹⁶ Counseling students on leadership has been a requirement of faculty since at least 2002.¹⁷ MSAF provides a source of feedback that can help

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faculty to perform this function. CAL furnishes tailored coaching guides for faculty and has conducted professional development programs in U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) schools on MSAF coaching.¹⁸ CAL has increased the number of instructional sessions for TRADOC schools for fiscal year 2017.

McAninch recommended that tools be restructured to support vertical development. This point is at odds with Army doctrine that emphasizes common behaviors across levels and positions. The new OER system does not require different competencies at three different levels of leadership as implied in the article. Instead, the tiered OER presents the same competencies at different levels of detail, which allows higher-ranking raters to use greater discretion in what aspects are emphasized. A central idea of an organization's competency-based framework is to first focus on what is common. This reinforces leaders' identifying with a common purpose and working together to achieve shared understanding and synchronized intent. The vertical aspect of development is achieved with assessors of different ranks assessing leaders of different ranks.

McAninch's article implied that the MSAF questions were modeled after Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) products and the Army did not "grow its own." The Army did develop its own competency model and a unique 360-degree assessment instrument. The Army Research Institute developed and validated the Leadership Requirements Model before it was adopted into Army doctrine.¹⁹ The questions used in the MSAF instruments were developed to tie directly to these Army competencies and were updated when doctrine was updated in 2012. The MSAF questions tie directly to the behaviors described in Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership*, and Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Leader Development*.²⁰ The Army Leadership Requirements Model uses ten leadership competencies and thirteen attributes, while CCL's Benchmarks has sixteen leadership competencies and five derailment factors.²¹ There are only three competencies with similar titles between the Army Leader Behavior Scale (LBS) 2.0 and CCL's Benchmarks instrument. The LBS 2.0 has fifty-four items, while Benchmarks has 130 items. Only about ten items from Benchmarks have much commonality to the LBS items. CASAL studies continue to show that the Army leadership competencies are valid

predictors of outcomes desired in the Army—leader effectiveness, subordinate productivity, team cohesion, and unit ability to perform missions.²²

A good way to increase the impact of 360-degree assessments lies in the hands of commanders who have the authority to set up and conduct Unit 360 events. Gen. William Wallace, the senior official responsible for leader development at the time of program decision, saw the strength of 360-degree assessments in the context of a crucible training event, where leaders get the full opportunity to exercise leadership and to observe the leadership of others under realistic conditions. The Army's policy writers for MSAF thought that requiring 360-degree assessments in mission rehearsal exercises would be too burdensome for deploying units and instead focused implementation guidance—and eventual compliance reporting for officers—around the individual self-initiated events. Some commanders and other organizational leaders still elect to conduct Unit 360 events.²³ They report great value in the feedback they receive on leadership trends in their units. Compared to self-initiated events, Unit 360-assessed leaders are twice as likely to discuss their feedback with others and to develop an individual development plan, and nine times more likely to get coaching.²⁴

CAL's MSAF team continually works on designing improvements to MSAF. One example is based on input received from the field. The MSAF individual feedback reports will be enhanced to show leaders how they are assessed compared to the average for their rank group. The report will also provide ways to develop based on the leader's individualized results. The development actions are already available in chapter 7 of FM 6-22, and the MSAF feedback report will be modified to include the most relevant actions matching a specific leader's results.²⁵ This will enable leaders to better see what they can do to accelerate their development. The report will also provide more emphasis on how to make immediate use of the feedback, rather than focusing on follow-on actions in an individual leader development plan. For example, if superiors rate the leader more favorably than subordinates, the leader may be too upwardly focused and not attending to what subordinates expect from that leader. This feedback can prompt an immediate change in self-awareness, and it can be acted on without

creating a development plan. These improvements will help increase the effects of MSAF. Whatever the design

features and implementation decisions, the impact of any program ultimately depends on how leaders use it. ■

Notes

1. Kevin McAninch, "How the Army's Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback Program Could Become a Catalyst for Leader Development," *Military Review* 96, no. 5 (September-October 2016): 84-93.
2. Department of the Army Pamphlet 350-58, *Leader Development for America's Army* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 2013); *The Army Training and Leader Development Panel Officer Study Report to the Army* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combined Arms Center, 2003).
3. Angela I. Karrasch, Technical Report 2006-1, *The Army Leader Assessment and Feedback Program* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Leadership [CAL], 2006); All Army Activities (ALARACT) Message 124/2008, "Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback Program," 12 May 2008; Army Regulation (AR) 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2014). The requirement is being moved from AR 350-1 to AR 600-100, *Army Leadership*.
4. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014, Pub. L. No. 113-66, § 571, 127 Stat. 672 (2013).
5. Chaitra M Hardison et al., *360-Degree Assessments: Are They the Right Tool for the U.S. Military?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015).
6. Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, cited in "Commander 360 Program," Stand-To! Website, 15 March 2016, accessed 1 December 2016, https://www.army.mil/standto/archive_2016-03-15/.
7. Ryan Riley et al., Technical Report 2015-1, *2014 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Military Leader Findings* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CAL, 2015), 88.
8. Ibid.
9. Unpublished findings from the 2016 MSAF program evaluation conducted by the CAL, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Technical Report 2015-1, *CASAL: Military Leader Findings*, 89.
13. Unpublished findings from the 2016 MSAF program evaluation conducted by the CAL, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
14. Joshua Hatfield and John P. Steele, Technical Report 2010-2, *2009 Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL): Army Education* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: CAL, 2010), 23-26.
15. Two examples: Jay A. Conger, "Developing Leadership Capability: What's Inside the Black Box?" *The Academy of Management Executive* 18, no. 3 (2004): 136-39; David V. Day et al., "Advances in Leader and Leadership Development: A Review of 25 Years of Research and Theory," *The Leadership Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2014): 63-82.
16. The initial directive was ALARACT 124/2008. Guidance was later codified in AR 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development*.
17. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 350-10, *Institutional Leader Training and Education* (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 2002).
18. Faculty and advanced coaching guides are available on "Leader Development Tools," Virtual Improvement Center (VIC), MSAF website, <https://msaf.army.mil/Home/LeadOn.aspx> (CAC required); "Leader Development Resources," CAL website, accessed 1 December 2016, <http://usacac.army.mil/organizations/mccoe/cal/ldrdevelopment>.
19. Jeffrey Horey et al., Technical Report 1148, *Competency Based Future Leadership Requirements* (Arlington, VA: United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2004); Jeffrey Horey et al., Technical Report 1199, *A Criterion-Related Validation Study of the Army Core Leader Competency Model* (Arlington, VA: U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2007).
20. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2012); Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Leader Development* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2015).
21. "Benchmarks for Managers: Assessing the Lessons of Experience," Center for Creative Leadership website, accessed 1 December 2016, <https://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/benchmarks-for-managers-brochure-center-for-creative-leadership.pdf>.
22. The most recently published CASAL report showing a statistically significant relationship between competencies and outcomes is Technical Report 2015-1, *CASAL: Military Leader Findings*, 22.
23. The first guidance came from Secretary of the Army, "Army Directive 2011-16 (Changes to the Army Evaluation Reporting System)," 15 September 2011; the guidance was codified in AR 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2015); and requires the rater to verify the rated officer has a completed MSAF in accordance with AR 350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development*.
24. Unpublished findings from the 2016 MSAF program evaluation conducted by the CAL, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
25. FM 6-22, *Leader Development*.